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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000761

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SUBJECT: A CLOSER LOOK AT IRANIAN STUDENTS IN BAKU

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Classified By: DCM Donald Lu for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S) Summary: On June 13, Iran Watcher met with five Iranian students (all ethnic Azeris) studying in Baku. The students estimated that approximately 3,000 Iranian students were pursuing an education in Azerbaijan, most concentrated at Baku State University and the Medical University. (This number is significantly higher than the 700-800 students estimated by other Embassy contacts.) These students' motivations for studying in Azerbaijan included a desire to study in the Azeri language, the ability to study in a discipline of their choosing, and a desire to escape the rigid controls over political expression in Iran. The students reported difficulties in financing their education, as well as accreditation problems upon returning to Iran foremost among them. They also reported heavy scrutiny from Iranian security services both in Azerbaijan (including through Iranian Cultural Center outreach activities) and when they return to Iran. The students reported following a wide range of foreign and domestic media sources, saying VOA's Azerbaijani- and Farsi-language websites were the most popular among their peers. All of the students reported an interest in returning to Iran upon completion of their studies. End Summary.

12. (C) On June 13, Iran Watcher met with five Iranian students (all ethnic Azeris) studying in Baku. According to the students, their greatest motivation for studying in Azerbaijan was a desire to study in the Azeri language, which is impossible at an Iranian university according to the students. Describing the difficulties all Iranian students face when seeking to secure an opening at a university of their choice or in the discipline of their choosing, the students said that foreign exchange programs were an attractive alternative for many young Iranians regardless of their religion or ethnicity. The students also reported that economic conditions in Iran were another major factor, with some students believing that a foreign education would improve their chances of receiving a job when returning to Iran, and others interested in seeking employment abroad before considering a return. A strong desire to escape the rigid controls over political expression in Iran was another factor for all five students gathered.

13. (C) The students estimated that approximately 3,000 Iranian students were pursuing an education in Azerbaijan, most concentrated at Baku State University and the Medical University. One student pursuing a master's degree

attributed the high proportion of Iranian students at Baku State University to the wide range of undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate opportunities available there. A student at the Medical University reported 300 Iranian students to be studying there, most seeking to become either physicians or pharmacists. The students estimated 90 percent of the Iranian students in Azerbaijan to be ethnic Azeris, with the remaining 10 percent to be Persian (of this 10 percent, they believed the majority to have an ethnic Azeri parent).

14. (C) According to the students, they face a number of obstacles when seeking an education in Azerbaijan, with financing their education and accreditation problems upon returning to Iran foremost among them. Noting that while the Iranian government encourages Iranian students to study in countries such as Tajikistan and Armenia by providing them with scholarships, the students reported that the Iranian government does not provide any financial support to Iranian students in Azerbaijan, a policy they attributed to the Iranian government not wanting ethnic Azeris to study in Azerbaijan. As a result, the students reported having to rely on the assistance of their families or, in the case of the master's student at Baku State University, by seeking employment. According to the students, it cost them between USD 1,500 and 2,000 per year to study in Azerbaijan, with student and dormitory fees, and food their most significant expenses. (The two medical students noted that "administrative fees" for bribes also accounted for a sizable portion of their academic expenses.) The students reported that Iranians studying in Azerbaijan received no financial assistance or other benefits from the Azerbaijani government.

15. (C) The students reported that the Iranian government keeps close tabs on their activities in Azerbaijan and also imposes certification requirements upon completion of their

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studies. The students reported frequent and lengthy questioning by Iranian security officials when ever they sought to enter or exit Iran. When back in Iran for academic breaks, the students reported that they were forced to check in with local security services for questioning about their studies, who they were in contact with, if foreign representatives had contacted them, and from whom they were receiving financial support for their studies. Once having completed their studies, the students reported that they would have to take an examination (reportedly administered by the Ministry of Science and Technology) upon returning to Iran in order for their foreign degrees to be recognized by the Iranian government. The students said that in addition to this examination, educational and security checks had to be conducted by the Iranian embassy in the country of foreign study to ensure that the students had in fact completed their academic studies and remained loyal to the Iranian government. The students claimed that for Iranian students who had studied in Azerbaijan, the chances of passing either the academic examination or security checks was not guaranteed.

16. (C) Cognizant of the careful scrutiny paid their activities by the Iranian government, the students said that the Iranian embassy and cultural center sponsored a number of activities aimed at maintaining contact with the Iranian student community. According to the students, retreats, receptions, and other events were regularly organized by the embassy and cultural center, events that they were "strongly encouraged" to attend. The students also reported that they had to be very careful on campus and in their dormitories because they believed a number of their fellow students to be serving as "moles," regularly going to the embassy to report on their activities. In addition to feeling that their activities were closely monitored by Iranian authorities, they also reported receiving considerable pressure from Iranian embassy officials to discontinue their studies and return to Iran. One undergraduate student reported that when

attempting to renew his passport at the Iranian embassy, the official assisting him told him that if he wanted to return to Iran to study, the official could arrange entrance into Mashad University "without any problem."

¶7. (C) Very technologically savvy, the students reported following a wide range of foreign and domestic media sources for news about what was taking place in Iran. While all of the students were familiar with GunAz Television, Oyanish Television, and a number of Los Angeles-based Iranian television stations, they said that VOA's Azerbaijani- and Farsi-language websites were their source of choice when seeking information about developments within Iran. All of the students reported that they maintained regular contact with their families and friends in Iran by telephone and text messaging, but said that they did not discuss political or other events because they believed their calls to be monitored by Iranian authorities. The students also reported that they watched Turkish satellite television stations and, among local Azerbaijani media outlets, expressed a preference for Lider Television and ANS Television (a preference shared by most Azerbaijani viewers as well).

¶8. (C) All of the students reported a strong desire to return to their home country. Saying that the prospects for finding a job in Azerbaijan were as challenging as in Iran, one student said that he wanted to return to Iran in order to "make his country better."

¶9. (S/NF) Comment: These students' estimate of 3,000 Iranians studying in Azerbaijan is significantly higher than the 700-800 figure most Embassy contacts report (reftel). Because these students are well connected within the Iranian student community and represent the Baku universities with the highest concentration of Iranian students, some of our Azerbaijani human rights activist contacts believe their estimates could be accurate. GRPO, on the other hand, considers the students' estimate to be high. To the best of our knowledge, the Azerbaijani government does not maintain an accurate and up to date listing of Iranians studying in the country, making it difficult to evaluate the students' estimate of the total Iranian student population. We will continue our outreach efforts to this sizable component of the Iranian diaspora community in Azerbaijan and follow up with a more accurate assessment once available. End Comment.
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